

# Collected Resources for Studying *The Rez Sisters*

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## Introduction

“Until we have a generation of Indian people out there who have been inundated with Nanabush stories and incredible literature written by our own people, in their own language, we won’t really have our words as a people, as a distinct culture.”

– Tomson Highway (Bryan Loucks, “Another Glimpse: Excerpts from a Conversation with Tomson Highway, *Canadian Theatre Review*)

“Part of his project, as I understand it, is to aid in the decolonization of our minds and relationships through critical reflection.”

--Bryan Loucks (“Another Glimpse”)

Among Tomson Highway’s many accomplishments, his play *The Rez Sisters* (1986) brought Native voices to the national stage, encouraging the growth of a strong Native theatre community in Canada. *The Rez Sisters* was the first play by an Aboriginal playwright to tour the country. Impulses of preservation, recovery, and moving forward pervade Tomson Highway’s writing. His words here explain one motivation of this work: the claiming of “our words as a people, as a distinct culture.” For non-Indigenous people as well, his writing and that of other Indigenous writers presents a powerful opportunity. Education that seeks to interrupt colonial structures needs to value Indigenous authors and authorities, and there is much to learn from Indigenous cultures. The “distinct culture” Highway refers to is not a culture lost in time, but a present-day culture based in a history and mythology both deeply rooted in the North American continent and responding to recent historical changes with creativity and resilience.

*The Rez Sisters* is rooted in the western dramatic tradition and in Indigenous storytelling. Funny and challenging, it has the power to move its audiences, to expose and interrupt assumptions, and to provoke thought. We hope these resources will help readers, audience members, students and educators delve into *The Rez Sisters* and related topics. This document includes an annotated bibliography reviewing selected scholarly works on *The Rez Sisters*, Indigenous theatre in Canada, and racism in the classroom. We have also included a brief list of Highway’s other works, discussion questions, and suggestions for staging activities.

We would like to thank Virginia Cooke, Michelle LaFlamme, Wendy Burton, and Heather Davis-Fisch for their materials and suggestions which have shaped this guide. We hope these tools will be helpful in fostering a lively discussion of Highway’s work and its impact on society and theatre as a whole.

--Sophie Isbister and Melissa Walter

## Tomson Highway Bibliography

### Plays

*The Rez Sisters* (1986)

-Seven women living on the fictional Wasychigan Hill Indian Reserve, all related by blood, adoption, or marriage, raise money to attend “the biggest bingo in the world” and to bring one of the sisters, Marie-Adele Starblanket, to a doctor’s appointment in Toronto. In the preparation and on the journey, the women reveal their stories and their relationships with each other. A male Nanabush, who is recognized only by the dying Marie-Adele and the mentally disabled Zhaboonigan, appears as a seagull, a black bird, and as the bingo master.

*Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989)

-A counterpart to *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips* also takes place on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve, and follows seven men who live on the reserve through the lens of hockey. Nanabush appears as a female figure in this play. More violent than *The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips* has provoked more controversy. It looks at misogyny and alcoholism, family, and hope. Rape is a metaphor for colonial violence as well as a dramatically enacted reality in this play.

*Rose* (2003)

-The third play in Highway’s intended 7-play series about the Rez, *Rose* is again set on the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve and follows the story of Chief Big Rose. It tackles contemporary issues like casinos (the women, including characters from *Rez Sisters*, fight to stop one being built), land claims, treaties, and provincial politicians (Bob Rae). Similar themes to the two previous plays include violence against women and the preservation of Indigenous culture and language.

*Aria* (2003)

*Ernestine Shuswap Gets Her Trout* (2005)

-This play is about the people of the Thomson River Valley preparing for a visit by Sir Wilfred Laurier in 1910 to hear a list of concerns from local Indigenous chiefs. It follows the preparations of four women from the Shuswap, Okanagan and Thomson nations, and is laden with humour and playfulness. Despite the humour, *Ernestine* is a tragedy. It is based on historic events.

### Fiction

*Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998)

-This elegantly structured narrative tells of two Cree brothers and their journey from their home in northern Manitoba to residential school and then to Winnipeg. Common themes to Highway’s other work: trickster figure (the Fur Queen), family, impact of residential schools, religious conversion.

**Other**

*Caribou Song* (2001) – Children's fiction

*Dragon Fly Kites* (2002) - Children's fiction

*Fox on the Ice* (2003) - Children's fiction

*Comparing Mythologies* (2002) – Non-fiction essay

## Discussion and Activities

*As The Rez Sisters portrays some traumatic issues, discussing the play involves some risk. Instructors should put attention and thought into how the discussion of these potential triggers may impact students and decide on a strategy in advance of the first class.*

### **Interpretive contexts—Setting the stage**

1. Tomson Highway's work and its discussion in the university is part of post-colonial discourse and practice. This practice involves reconsidering the canon (that is, the writers and literature that are considered central and important for reading and study) and pedagogical strategies. One strategy is for the instructor and class to make the colonial context visible by considering issues such as:

--Situating ourselves in history. Acknowledging that we are a colonial country and there have been negative impacts. (See Ray, Miller, Carlson, McIntosh, from the Annotated Bibliography below)

--Inviting the group to have a look at feelings of hostility, guilt, or superiority. Asking, where does that come from? Let's break that down.

2. Situating ourselves. Whose traditional land are we on (See *Stolo Atlas*, Keith Thor Carlson, for details of this)? Where are we from? Who is our family? Who are you as a person and what is your relationship to this work?

3. Tomson Highway in history: Overview of Tomson Highway's biography and his positioning in the history of Aboriginal theatre in Canada. (See timeline, [www.tomsonhighway.ca](http://www.tomsonhighway.ca), and Daniel David Moses and Drew Hayden Taylor above.)

4. Purposes of storytelling: In an article about the Trickster, Daniel David Moses reports the purposes of storytelling, as told to him by writer/storyteller Lenore Keeshig-Tobias: to entertain, to educate, and to heal. Readers may be invited to keep these purposes in mind while discussing *The Rez Sisters*. How might *The Rez Sisters* serve each of these purposes?

5. Hybridity and change:

- Tomson Highway: "I think that every society is constantly in a state of change, of transformation, of metamorphoses. I think it is very important that it continue to be so to prevent the stagnation of our imaginations, our spirits, our soul....What I really find fascinating about the future of my life, the life of my people, the life of my fellow Canadians is the searching for this new voice, this new identity, this new tradition, this magical transformation that potentially is quite magnificent. It is the combination of the best of both worlds...combining them and coming up with something new" (quoted in Nothop)
- Homi K. Bhaba: the term "hybrid" refers to a discursive space where

“the insignia of authority becomes as mask, a mockery” and “which has been systematically denied by both colonialists and nationalists who have sought authority in the authenticity of ‘origins.’ It is precisely as a separation from ‘origins’ and ‘essences’ that this colonial space is constructed” (“Signs Taken for Wonders,” 103, cited Rabillard 5)

6. Comparison to Michel Tremblay’s play, *Les Belles Soeurs* (premiered 1968), which Tomson Highway has stated was one of the inspirations for *The Rez Sisters*. Both plays feature women dealing with poverty and its impact on women’s lives, as well as portraying “sisterhood” (in different ways). (See Usmiani in bibliography for some key similarities and differences between the two plays).

7. Gender and two-spiritedness: The term two-spirited refers to having male and female spirit in one body, and is a more holistic way of describing queer sexualities that comes from traditional First Nations thought. How might Tomson Highway’s awareness of two-spirited identity be reflected in *The Rez Sisters*?

### **Identifying structures in *The Rez Sisters***

1. Tomson Highway is a **musician** and he composes his plays with a sense of musical shape. Map the shape (in terms of sound, spectacle, number of people on stage, and major events) of the play

e.g. fight **scene at end of Act One answered by work scene at beginning of Act**

**Two.**

2. **Map the characters’ story arcs, and their relations to each other.**

- What are some different ways in which the women’s stories are interconnected?
- Identify pairings of the characters.  
**Identify parts of the plots of the seven women that could be considered circular as opposed to linear.** What do the women want in the story and what do they get?
- Drew Hayden Taylor says that “One of the things Tomson does with his work is again part of the Native consciousness: no one person is more important than the other person in the community. **There is no central character in *The Rez Sisters*. You’ve got seven women and a trickster figure, all of equal importance, all with an equal story.** And again, a lot of people are not used to that.” (“Storytelling to stage”). *Trace the moments where each woman comes to the fore.*
- Now, consider interconnection itself as a structural fact and theme of the play.

3. **Opening scene:** Why might the play start with Pelagia on the roof? What might be some significance of her physical vantage point? What does this vantage point allow in terms of exposition? What else does Pelagia tell us? How else does she create a starting point for this play?

4. **Language:** Notice when the Cree and Ojibway languages are used in the play. What is the significance of using Cree and Ojibway languages in particular moments and in the play as a whole? Consider also that not all of the audience can understand these languages. What is the effect?

5. **Hybridity:** Identify places where *The Rez Sisters* "inhabits the terrain of the hybrid" (Rabillard 20).

What are some effects of the play's deployment of hybridity??

6. **Title:** In the play, the "Rez Sisters" are a biker gang which Emily Dictionary belonged to with her lover, Rose. What are some other connotations and meanings of the play's title?

7. **Comedy/Humour:** Collect examples where Highway employs humour to mediate conflict or to heal in *The Rez Sisters*? More generally, what is the role of humour in this play? Are there laughs in the play that you find painful?

8. **Nanabush.** The single-play edition of *The Rez Sisters* includes this note on Nanabush:

"The dream world of North American Indian mythology is inhabited by the most fantastic creatures, beings, and events. Foremost among these beings is the "Trickster," as pivotal and important a figure in the Native world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology. "Weesageechack" in Cree, "Nanabush" in Ojibway, "Raven" in others, "Coyote" in still others, this Trickster goes by many names and many guises. In fact, he can assume any guise he chooses. Essentially a comic, clownish sort of character, he teaches us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth; he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit.

"Some say that "Nanabush" left this continent when the whiteman came. We believe he is still here among us—albeit a little the worse for wear and tear—having assumed other guises. Without him—and without the spiritual health of this figure—the core of Indian culture would be gone forever" (*The Rez Sisters*, Fifth House Publishers, 1998, xii).

--Nanabush and remembering.

Nanabush becomes the bingo master off stage but changes into the nighthawk on stage. What is the effect of visible vs. invisible transformation?

(Perkins: "The difference between the two quick changes is an exercise in audience education. Nanabush's appearance as the Bingo Master is just that—an apparition, unprepared, a bit shocking. His second, visible transformation dispels that illusion. It displays to the audience the continuity and the disjunction between the contemporary and the mythic, each of which is fully articulated and neither of which is a subordinated 'component' of the other...He exists in two guises, in two costumes, in two times, in the mythic past and in the immediate present." (263-264))

--Nanabush and the unknowable. Nanabush doesn't have or at least doesn't give

all the answers. Potential contrast to versions of spirituality or religion that encourage followers to “follow precept and example” (Johnston, 255)?

--Nanabush and gender. Nanabush is the only male in *The Rez Sisters* and he appears as female in *Dry Lips*. The Cree language does not require gender and Nanabush is both male and female. What is Highway’s purpose in using this figure in this way?

**List of Symbols/Props/Metaphors for Discussion (consider these in relation to the topics and questions above?)**

- Birth and children. Marie-Adele's cancer and fourteen children, Philomena's lost child, and Emily's pregnancy.
- Pelajia's hammer—What are some different ways she uses it? Consider its gendered associations and its associations with different types of power?
- Nanabush: he appears as a white bird and then a black bird and as the bingo master.
- Bingo itself. What is the appeal of bingo?
- Country music.
- Rose's (member of the Rez Sisters biker gang) unwillingness to yield on the freeway
- The number 7, and multiples of 7. (7 women, B14 in bingo.)
- Philomena's toilet . Consider that the context of reserve housing being built with cheap materials and resulting problems with water and plumbing, among other problems. Highway's ironic and comedic way of addressing this issue can be noted.
- Names of people and places:
  - Wasayichigan, the name of the fictional reserve, means window. Why is this significant?  
Zhaboonigan means “needle” or “going through things.” How is this name, given to her by her community, significant?
- Rape as a symbol and as a lived reality “Rape may function as a metaphor for the intrusive, destructive impact of one society on another in this play, as it does in *Dry Lips*, but it is also a cruel fact” (Nothof)  
“[In the late 1980s and early 1990s] Being a novice, I couldn't help but wonder if in order to write Native drama you had to have a rape in your play...and I began to think, why?” (Drew Hayden Taylor, “Storytelling to stage”)
- The [female] body-- elimination and resilience (Rabillard)



## Staging Activity

How do sound and stage action (as opposed to character or plot) function in this play? In groups, have students block out key scenes of the play and present to the class. They can use visual aides. This activity is ideal once students have a grasp on the overall themes and content of the play.

Students can be reassured that they are not expected to be trained actors, but told they are expected to have a clear understanding of the scene and to enact it purposefully. Some basic starting points:

- a staging is an interpretation
- they will learn about the scene by moving through it
- they have certain tools to show their interpretation, including voice (pitch, speed, volume), body language, focus, levels (e.g. standing, sitting), the arrangement of actors in the performance space (promixity to each other, upstage, downstage), and decisions to change position or to move.
- everyone in the performance space is significant, even if they are not speaking or moving.
- they can and should make specific choices about these matters.

As a follow up to this activity, students could discuss or write briefly about differences between reading and staging the scene.

Suggested scenes for staging activity:

- **p. 35 – 37.** The scene where the women decide to go to the BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD and Annie, Marie-Adele and Veronique talk about what they will do with the money
- **p. 44 – 48.** The riot/argument scene in the store, and Zhaboonigan's revelation of her rape.
- **p. 70 – 75.** The fundraising montage.
- **p. 77 – onward.** The layout of the van scene when the women pair off into seat rows and have discussions.
- **p. 100 – 104.** The climax of the play where Nanabush, dressed as the Bingo Master, ushers Marie-Adele into the spirit world.

### Using staging for inquiry-based learning.

The staging activity can also be more explicitly inquiry-based. A strategy here is to ask or get students to generate a question about a scene, and then use the scene for inquiry-based activities. In other words, here the focus in acting out a scene is to answer a question. For instance, how do two women's different views of gender play out in a particular scene? Or, could the scene about the toilet be used to illustrate varying attitudes toward Euro-american culture, by having one group play it as thrilled about the toilet, and one play a bit against the text to show ambivalence about it? Some of the

questions in the “Discussion” section above could also be addressed by this kind of inquiry-based approach to enacting a scene.

### **Forum theatre/Theatre for Living inquiry.**

Forum theatre (from Augusto Boal’s work) allows the audience to stop a scene and suggest that the actors say or do something different, in order to try to seek a different outcome. Instructors may want to consider using these techniques to explore issues in the play. *Theatre for Living* by David Diamond is a useful resource for this kind of inquiry (in bibliography, and available for on-demand printing from the Trafford publishing website).

### **A Note on the whole person:**

Some of the issues raised in discussions of this play may be challenging or disturbing for students. It can be helpful to offer to stay around after class to debrief, and/or to make students aware of other resources available to them at UFV. Some instructors use journals as a space where students can debrief without the pressure of the class.

### **Additional resources for students and instructors at UFV:**

Aboriginal Access Services and Resource Centre: <http://www.ufv.ca/arc.htm>, on the Chilliwack campus in the G Building (the old daycare) and on the Abbotsford campus in Room A219a and in the student lounge in Room A221

RAN: Racism and Anti-Racism Network

UFV Counselling services: <http://www.ufv.ca/counselling.htm>?

## Annotated Bibliography

Carlson, Keith Thor. *A Stó:lo-Coast Salish historical atlas*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2001.

Physical and social history of the traditional territory of the Sto: lo people. Useful for situating ourselves in the Fraser Valley.

Diamond, David. *Theatre for Living: The Art and Science of Community-Based Dialogue*. Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2007.

Philosophy and techniques of interactive theatre.

Filewod, Alan. "Receiving aboriginality: Tomson Highway and the crisis of cultural authenticity." *Theatre Journal* 46.3 (1994): 363. *JSTOR*. Web.

Focuses on some implications of notions of authenticity in the critical and scholarly reception of Highway's Rez plays. Filewod discusses what happens when white critics read Highway's plays in terms of a humanistic, essentializing western dramatic tradition, arguing that this process "effectively replicates" the colonization process. White critics and audiences can be tempted to receive "the elements of apparent authenticity in Highway's plays [such as *Nanabush*] ... as exoticized invitations to appropriate aboriginality" (369). In the case of *Dry Lips*, the isolation of this play from a community of discourse and debate in Indigenous theatre circles, and its reception by white critics, has tended to fall into a discourse of authenticity that asks the play to be representative of a monolithic Indigenous culture, that disallows criticism of represented misogyny in the play (as when it is argued that white feminists just don't understand First Nations culture, while the critiques by Indigenous women do not receive prominence), and that also leads to white audiences idealizing the characters in the play as "more real."

Haig-Brown, Celia. "Decolonizing Diaspora: Whose Traditional Land Are We On?" *Cultural and Pedagogical Inquiry*, 1:2 (2009). Web.

Examines the pedagogical value in asking "Whose traditional land are we on" as part of an inquiry into diaspora and of anti-racist practice.

Highway, Tomson. "On Native Mythology." *Theatrum* 6 Spring 1987: 29-31. Print.

Tomson Highway discusses his purpose in writing, his choice of genre, and the significance of Native mythology. He says that he writes plays because the oral traditions which carry "a mythology as extraordinary and as powerful as the human imagination itself" translate best onto the three-dimensional space of the stage. He explains that "this mythology has to be re-worked somewhat if it is to be relevant to us Indians living in today's world." He discusses the issue of

needing to write in English to be heard by a larger audience and predicts that by writing in English, Native writers will change the language. He frames his writing project as “the articulation of the dreamworld” of a people, a dreamworld without which a culture dies. This article gives insight into Highway’s theatrical inspirations in terms of incorporating mythology into his work, specifically *The Rez Sisters*.

Johnston, Denis W. "Lines and Circles: The 'Rez' Plays of Tomson Highway." *Canadian Literature* 124-125.(1990): 254-264. Print.

An early, somewhat essentializing analysis of the plot structure of *The Rez Sisters*, this article discusses the cyclical patterns in Highway’s Rez plays by contextualizing the importance of cycles (circles) in Native spirituality. Johnston examines a difference between linear structure in the Euro-Christian dramatic tradition and the circular structure of life in Cree thought, quoting Highway who has said “This is the way the Cree look at life. A continuous cycle. A self-rejuvenating force. By comparison, Christian theology is a straight line. Birth, suffering, and then the apocalypse....Human existence isn’t a struggle for redemption to the Trickster. It’s fun, a joyous celebration” (255). Pages 257-259 summarize “through lines” for the characters and relate them to larger themes.

Loucks, Bryan. "Another Glimpse: Excerpts from a Conversation with Tomson Highway." *Canadian Theatre Review* No. 68, Fall (1991): pp. 9-11. Print.

In an interview between Loucks and Tomson Highway, Highway challenges what he calls the continued colonization of Indigenous people through the teaching of Western stories as opposed to teaching traditional Native stories. This interview is illuminating in that Highway frankly discusses the reasons he writes what he does. It also provides a brief biography of Tomson Highway and discusses his role in the Native theatre movement. “Part of his project, as I understand it, is to aid in the decolonization of our minds and relationships through critical reflection” (11). “All life, within the frame of indigenous knowing and being, is sacred, personal and in relationship” (11).

Miller, J. R.. *Shingwauk’s vision: A History of Native Residential Schools*. U of Toronto Press, 1996. Print.

“The harmonious integration of Aboriginal and Western education witnessed by the title’s vision stands in contrast to the reality of residential schools for Native children in Canada. Miller (history, U. of Saskatchewan) studies the foundations of residential schooling in 17th century New France, its evolution in the 1800s, and its eventual demise in the 1960s. The author brings parity to his painstaking research, treating the motivations of missionaries, government officials, and Natives with equal attendance, but without excusing the abuses of the residential

method of instruction and work which have been characterized as an attempt at 'cultural genocide.'" (Book News, Inc., Portland, OR)

Moses, Daniel David. "The Trickster's Laugh: My Meeting with Tomson and Lenore." *American Indian Quarterly* 28.1-2 (2004): 107-111. *Project Muse*. Web.

This article tells the story of the 1986 meeting between the author Daniel David Moses, Tomson Highway, and writer/storyteller Lenore Keeshig-Tobias. All three are First Nations but from different bands and with different upbringings. The writer discusses the need for First Nations people to not be seen as the stereotypes of "stoic," "romantic," "heroic," or "a problem." and thus, the meeting between the three develops into a planning session to use the trickster archetype (known in *The Rez Sisters* as Nanabush) "to open up a space for a little bit of the strange but true about us." Moses quotes writer/storyteller Lenore Keeshig-Tobias as saying that storytelling has three purposes: to entertain, to educate, and to heal. "The Trickster as we knew or rediscovered him, was so shifty and shiftless, so horny and greedy, so lucky, so funny, it almost did not hurt us to be human."

McIntosh, Peggy. "White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack." *Independent School* 49.2 (1990): 31. *Academic Search Premier*. Web.

McIntosh's foundational article on white privilege encourages readers to view racism as a systemic web made up of advantages given to the dominant group (whites) and disadvantages given to everyone else. She uses the analogy of the "invisible knapsack" and describes it as being full of metaphoric (but very real) structures that provide advantages to white people. She states that it is important to acknowledge white privilege in order to redesign society more equitably. This article is full of important concepts for teaching texts that may be challenging due to their portrayal of the effects of colonialism.

Nothof, Anne. "Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: The Plays of Tomson Highway." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Etudes en Littérature Canadienne* 20.2 (1995): 34-43. *Erudit*. Web.

Discusses both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in regards to the inevitable mix of Native culture and white culture on the reserve. Nothof shows the various ways cultures collide in a detailed overview of most characters in both plays. She also includes a discussion of the rape of the character Zhaboonigan and a discussion of the meaning and actions of Nanabush in both plays. Equal weight is given to both plays in this article. It provides an analysis of many details and images in both plays.

Perkins, Lina. "Remembering the Trickster in Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*." *Modern Drama*, 45:2 (2002): 259-269. *Literature Resource Center*. Web.

Discusses Nanabush as a figure of memory "whose complex temporal allegiance provides an opportunity for the laboriously creative act of remembering" (261).

Rabillard, Sheila. "Absorption, Elimination, and the Hybrid: Some Impure Questions of Gender and Culture in the Trickster Drama of Tomson Highway." *Essays in Theatre/Etudes Theatrales* 12.1 (1993): 3-27. Print.

Rabillard starts her literary criticism and analysis of Tomson Highway's Rez plays with an outline of a study of traditional Trickster stories of the Winnebago people and discusses how the anthropological focus on the "ethnographic present" (the "pure" state before white colonization that some anthropologists have strived for and defined themselves against) encourages stereotypes of Native people; she uses this framework to set up Highway's *The Rez Sisters* as a hybrid, not conforming to either "pure" stereotype of Native culture ("noble savage" or "degraded indian" [Rabillard 7]) and working with Western dramatic tropes and references to show Native stories. Relying Edward Said's theorizations of Orientalism and colonialism, Rabillard posits that by portraying women as strong and fluid characters, Highway subverts the feminization that has been ascribed to both colonized Native people and the Orient in an attempt to "Other" and devalue them (9). This article pays attention to the "fascination" that the women have with the dominant culture (i.e. Annie Cook's obsession with "white guys" and all seven of the Rez sisters' love of bingo). In the second half of Rabillard's essay, she discusses gender in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (in which all four female characters are played by different portrayals of Nanabush), focusing on tropes of absorption and elimination. She states that both plays in Highway's Rez series are a critique of the gender binary in Western culture and the English language, something that Highway says is absent in Cree and Ojibway (16). She also discusses the hybridizing effect of using the Cree and Ojibway languages freely alongside English.

Ray, Arthur. *I have Lived Here Since the World Began: An Illustrated History of Canada's Native People*, Toronto: Lester Publishing, 1996. Print.

This overview history includes chapters on the Canadian government's efforts to destroy Indigenous societies (Chapter 15: "It is a strict law that bids us dance") and on treaties and the establishment of reservations (Chapter 16: "From Buffalo Hunting to Farming").

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" and other conversations about race*, Basic Books, 2002. Print.

Introductory chapter includes useful framework and terms for understanding racism, including for instance "Racism: A System of Advantage Based on Race."

Taylor, Drew Hayden. "Storytelling to Stage: The Growth of Native Theatre in Canada." *TDR: The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies* 41.3 [T155] (1997): 140-152. JSTOR. Web.

This foundational article surveys the history and development of native theatre in Canada through the lens of native storytelling traditions. It analyzes the historical

reasons why Native drama doesn't take the Western approach to conflict. Taylor writes that "theatre is just a logical extension of storytelling. To look back at the roots and origins of traditional storytelling—not just Native storytelling but storytelling in general—it's about taking your audience on a journey through the use of your voice, your body, and the spoken word." He explains that traditional storytelling was "a way of relating the history of the community; it was a way of explaining human nature; it had metaphorical, philosophical, psychological implications" He argues that Indigenous stories do not tend to center around conflict in ways that Western drama does, and he recounts traditional stories to illustrate this. The article focuses on the history of native theatre and the development of unique native voices in the Canadian dramatic landscape.

Taylor, Drew Hayden. "There's a Trickster behind every Nanabush" *Toronto Star* 3 June 1995.

A brief, funny, and colloquial article about the tendency of academics to search for "the Trickster figure" in every piece of Native theatre or literature. It touches on the history of anthropologists going to Native villages to seek out stories and being sent home (mostly) empty handed.

Theobald, Elizabeth. "Their Desperate Need for Noble Savages." *The Drama Review* 41.3 (1997): 142-43. *JSTOR*. Web.

In this short article Theobald discusses America's failing to develop the vibrant first nations theatre that Canada enjoyed in the 80's and 90's. She cites the "noble savage" stereotype (as seen in the film *Dances With Wolves*) expected by the public and critics as one of the barriers for the creation of native theatre in America. This is a good article to read alongside Drew Hayden Taylor's article in *The Drama Review* as both articles together give an overview of the development of Native theatre across North America.

Anita Tuharsky, "Play promotes racism, sexism and oppression," Letter to the editor, *Windspeaker*, 12 March 1991: 5. (cited in Filewod)

Excerpt: "This play [*Dry Lips Oughtta Move to Kapuskasing*, the male counterpart to *The Rez Sisters*] sadly disappointed me and tore at my heart because it so terribly misrepresented aboriginal peoples.... He did not balance the negativity being presented about life on the reserves and the prevailing attitudes. He also failed to make the public aware many aboriginal communities are going through a healing process, working desperately with dedication to rebuild their nations. Highway abused his writing abilities and chose to disregard respect to create pleasures for the public which enjoys these stereotypes and images. It justifies their reluctance to see aboriginal peoples as equals." (Cited Filewod 370).

Renate Usmiani, "The Bingocentric Worlds of Michel Tremblay and Tomson Highway:

*Les Belles-Soeurs* vs. *The Rez Sisters*," *Canadian Literature* 144 (1995): 126-140. Print.

Compares and contrasts these two plays. "Both works stand as early monuments to postcolonial emancipation and self-assertion." Both make innovations in language and theatrical form as they focus on the lives of women dealing with structural conditions of poverty and their relationships with each other. In both, bingo is an "opportunity for satirizing their cheap consumerism and materialistic attitudes" as well as a way of imagining escape or change to the circumstances in which the women make their lives. The ability of Highway's characters to work together and support each other towards a positive goal, in spite of tensions, is a significant difference between the two plays, as is the drive and energy with which the "Rez sisters" pursue solutions that will benefit themselves, their families, and their community. The religious, spiritual, and ethical frameworks of the two plays is another significant contrast.

## **Web resources:**

De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Group: <http://www.debaj.ca/>

<http://www.fullcircleperformance.ca/> (This Vancouver-based arts organization has a 2 year ensemble training program)

Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance: <http://ipaa.ca/>

Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.: <http://www.nativeearth.ca/ne/>

Tomson Highway's webpage (includes his biography, works, and other resources) [www.tomsonhighway.ca](http://www.tomsonhighway.ca)

UFV libguide (guide to research resources available at the UFV library.): [http://libguides.ufv.ca/tomson\\_highway](http://libguides.ufv.ca/tomson_highway)

U of Guelph Aboriginal Theatre links: [http://www.uoguelph.ca/shakespeare/s\\_abtheatrelinks.cfm](http://www.uoguelph.ca/shakespeare/s_abtheatrelinks.cfm)